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was a gift that I wanted to give my country: the discovery that we could love and take pride in Brazil. There was a rare sense of privilege and

perfection about that experience, and that sensation stays with me as I move on to new undertakings.

BILL NICHOLS

History, Myth, and Narrative in Documentary

Documentary film operates in literal compliance with the writ of *habeas corpus*. "You should have the body"—without it the legal process comes to a standstill. "You should have the body"—without it the documentary tradition lacks its primary referent, the real social actor(s) of whose historical engagement it speaks. Documentary film raises in acute form the persistent question of what to do with people, how to represent them, or, how to represent the human body as a cinematic signifier in a manner commensurate with its status in the ensemble of social relations.

This question has taken shape around a particular film, *Roses in December* (Ana Carrigan and Bernard Stone, 1982).¹ *Roses* seeks to restore meaning to a life that has been lost—the life of Jean Donovan, a lay missionary murdered along with three North American nuns by a government death squad in El Salvador. *Roses* takes up the problems and issues that surround the stereotyping, dramatizing, or mythologizing of a human life. It also avoids the ideologically regressive response that followed the destruction of the space shuttle *Challenger*. In this case the process of extreme mythologization served to compensate for the embarrassing absence of the astronauts' bodies and the overwhelming presence of narrow-minded professionalism, venality, the promotion of spectacle and bureaucratic inhumanity. The seven astronauts were offered up frozen, as timeless icons for the collective memory. In *Roses*, the absent body of the murdered Jean Donovan is re-placed in history rather than displaced into an ethereal eternity.

Roses in December enlists our desire to understand a barbaric act in order to weave a complex set of homilies on the relation between the individual and the collective, the nature of

religious witness and service, the linkage, at least in Latin America, of religion and revolution, and the ethical/political dimensions of death and its commemoration. Commemoration of and dedication to the spirit of Jean Donovan, offered through the narrative-like closure of the film—beginning with the unearthing of Donovan's body at an unmarked gravesite and ending with the emotionally powerful "Departure Ceremony" a year later in honor of new volunteers for church service in Central America—provide a mechanism to satisfy viewer involvement even as this mechanism also leads us to recognize that full satisfaction requires additional action in the historical world to which the film refers. The first scene uses archival footage which documents the discovery of the gravesite and the unearthing of the four women's bodies. The partially decomposed remains unsettle the gaze enormously. The camera violates strong taboos in its prolonged record of this act of opening a grave and bringing the dead back into the sight of the living. These bodies are tangible evidence of selves no longer bound into the imaginary unity of the subject, no longer the agency of action but only brutalized remains that evidence the actions of others.

Roses in December is also a complex mix of (1) documents such as home movies, the testimony of friends, news footage of the disinterment and the pronouncements of public officials, (2) narrative strategies such as the imaginative reenactment of the crime itself and the investigation undertaken by the film-makers (less in order to determine who did it than to discover what can be learned from a situation where murder has been done) and (3) mythologizing strategies such as an iconography of reverence and a moral concern for personal

sacrifice, altruistic service and the potential for self-chosen martyrdom. None of these elements is unique to *Roses* and its overall structure is not particularly trailblazing. The film does offer, however, an exemplary demonstration of how the human body can be represented through a weave of materials that stand in for a person who is dead.

In what ways can the body of an individual be represented in documentary? By means of what conceptual framework can we imbue the body—its appearance and actions—with significance? If all our knowledge exists inside sets, frames or discourses, inside domains of understanding, then this would surely apply to our knowledge of the physical body insofar as it bears meaning and significance for ourselves and others. *Roses in December* points to three possibilities that I believe underlie all documentary. It holds all three in complex suspension and avoids pitfalls that come from stressing one possibility at the expense of the others. These three possible frames are (1) reference to the historical body of a social actor, (2) the representation of a narrative character, and (3) the transformation of the body through the iconography of the heroic or mythic. *Roses*, for example, reconstitutes the body of Jean Donovan as a living person, narrative character, and exemplary persona—but without stressing any one possibility more than the other two. Traditional biography, so often presented as “A Life,” in fact counters the errant trajectory of life with the smooth curve of dramatic narrative form. It might more properly be called “A Story.” Its unity and closure stand at odds to the open-endedness and incoherence of life as it is lived. *Roses in December*, however, operates in the crease between a lived life and a recounted life. Like historical fiction films, *Roses* gives us a life that is also a story but in such a way that the distance between the two frames is never covered over, the closure is incomplete and the sense of historical contingency remains vivid. *Roses* squarely confronts the question of how to figure the body, how to structure or present the person situated in history within a text structured as narrative and conducive to myth.

Unlike historical fiction films, documentary films lack the problem of finding themselves with a body too many. When an actor reincarnates an historical person, the actor’s very

presence testifies to the gap between the text and the life to which it refers. A second individual assumes the place that was occupied by another, yet can neither become that other nor offer a performance that disregards it. The problem for documentary is the contrary one of possessing a body too few. It must represent an historical person (an agent of social activity) within a narrative field as a character (an agent of narrative functions), and within a mythic or contemplative field as an icon or symbol (a recipient of identificatory investments).

Mythic figures like celebrities or stars whom we meet in the flesh may unsettle us in ways similar to an encounter with a cadaver: their bodies represent the place where we expect to locate an abundance of meanings, but this place is, in fact, eerily empty. Stars and models, people whose mythic status depends on their repeated appearance in “vehicles” rather than on their personal achievements within the domain of the historical, can seem strangely vacant in person, “in the flesh.” The physical bodies of stars and advertising models constitute the living site of a disguised objectification. Paradoxically, their actual bodies undergo reification so that possibilities for the presentation of an ideal self can be suggested. But what kind of self is it that must be presented in the form of an icon, an object, or, worse still, a commodity? Like the nude of classic oil painting, such bodies are condemned to never be themselves. This is a mock form of death; it is a mode of self-mortification or repression. Although the star or model is dressed up rather than laid out, although he or she is made up rather than embalmed, posed or presented rather than interred, and recovered through the fixed likeness of a photographic image rather than exhumed, the treatment of the body is nonetheless disturbingly similar to the processes of funereal ritual. Something of the historically contingent must be evacuated to render the body as icon or ideal. The absence of the provisional, of contingency, can be felt, but it is nothing compared to the felt absence of life itself when we confront death in the form of a cadaver. Reification achieves finality; mythologization may follow.

The mythic status of historical figures derives not from the representation of the body elsewhere but from its political or ethical deployment in history itself, and from the ways in

which texts like documentaries can elaborate upon that deployment. For social actors like Jean Donovan (or Charlie Clements, the ex-Air Force pilot who became a doctor and a Quaker and then spent a year giving medical treatment to the rural people of El Salvador—the subject of Deborah Schaeffer's *Witness to War*), the mythic quality of their lives derives from the two-dimensional space of history and interpersonal identification, represented to us in narrative form. For stars and models, the mythic occupies a two-dimensional realm of narrative and psychic identification, enriched with imaginary reference to the historical. This results in a very different relationship between the body and our psychic investment in its representation.

Roses in December, in dealing with a deceased individual, can only present its central character as a structuring absence that the film must reconstitute as a narrative character (the individualized agent of a series of narrative predicates) and an exemplary persona. In this project it departs quite sharply from string-of-interview documentaries like *Rosie the Riveter* or *Babies and Banners* which reconstruct an historical episode, rather than an individual life, mainly by recruiting the testimony of participant-witnesses long after the fact. (In terms of structure and questions of "voice," however, *Roses* belongs more fully with string-of-interview documentaries than with their more self-reflexive and experimental successors.²)

Roses is similar to those fiction films that set out to recover a past life, beginning at a point from which we may ask, "How did this come to pass?" In this task *Roses* bears a loose structural resemblance to films like *Young Mr. Lincoln*, *The Power and the Glory*, and *Mishima*. Still closer analogies exist with *Citizen Kane*, particularly in the stress on the enigmatic, in the use of a largely invisible reporter who travels afar to seek out the insights of those who knew the character, in the multiplicity of voices and evidentiary sources, and in the catalytic, galvanizing force of the moment of death. A significant difference is that the reporter in *Roses* is sometimes visible but never identified (it is co-director Ana Carrigan whom we see) rather than identified but seldom visible, as in the case of the fictitious character "Thompson." The difference follows the distinction between the

documentary practice of observational film-makers whose lack of identity facilitates their function as a surrogate audience (what we see is what we would have seen had we been there) and the narrative practice of sharing the point of view of an individuated character (what we see is what Thompson saw when he was there). The minimally represented body of an investigating agent strengthens a film's claims of access to the real, the historical, without insisting on highly individualized, subjectivist, or self-reflexive interpretations of it.

Needless to say, in many films this distinction is not rigidly upheld. Some documentaries move much closer to the narrative practice of *Kane* where the film-maker becomes a character and our engagement with the film's world is from his/her point of view. A particularly stunning example occurs in Jon Alpert's *Hard Metals Disease*, where Alpert, like Ana Carrigan, acknowledges his own presence as investigator but becomes less a surrogate viewer and more vividly a character and social actor himself. He pushes this tendency beyond the activist form Michael Rubbo has given it in his National Film Board of Canada films.³ Alpert, who did both the sound and image recording himself, in video, becomes far more a full participant than an investigator. He places himself in the thick of the action of *Hard Metals Disease*, which centers on the efforts of Frank Johnson and other victims of this industrial disease to spare yet more workers from the same fate. The camera becomes the locus of a character, somewhat like the highly subjectivized camera of *Lady of the Lake*. Alpert, represented by his hand-held camera, appears to talk *into* or *within* the frame, as a voice-off, as one character or social actor among many, rather than *out of* or *from beyond* the frame, as a voice-over, in the tradition of the voice of God commentator, the interviewer or eyewitness reporter. We only glimpse Alpert occasionally when his arm waves through the frame, but the inclusion of his own comments and the reactions of others to him makes the camera seem a character with a transparent body and the film-maker as much a social actor as those he films. The effect is far more convincing than in *Lady in the Lake* where the absence of the professional actor's body from the narrative frame impedes our identification.

A vivid illustration of Alpert's participant

role as narrative and social agent occurs in a sequence where Frank Johnson and several other workers go to Mexicali to warn workers at a branch plant of Valenite (the offending company that has, in effect, already poisoned them) of the dangers they face. Frank is initially stymied: the Mexican workers don't speak English. But then Alpert's voice shifts to Spanish, translating Johnson's warnings for him, with no less passion than Johnson himself. There is no fly-on-the-wall pretense here. Soon the police arrive and take the workers off to the police station as Alpert tries to film the entire episode. When Johnson is released, Alpert is there to meet him. Johnson says the police clearly want him to go back home as he walks past the trailing Alpert, his gestures apparently those of someone successfully deterred.

Alpert intervenes: "But you wanted to talk to the workers." Johnson looks back toward the camera and Alpert, speechless. Cut. We are once again talking to workers outside the factory! What we see is what Alpert participates in and relays back to us through his own visual field, the camera. Many documentarians edit out their own questions and rightfully so: they add nothing to the stories interviewees tell. But Alpert does not play the role of interviewer; he is a participant, not an observer. His work invites further investigation of the essayist tradition in documentary and of the pronounced inflections in documentary form brought about by the first person "voice" of the film-maker him/herself.⁴

Roses in December retains the fiction of the camera as non-participant or observational witness. It seeks to observe the qualities and conditions of a lived life, but its first obstacle is the very death with which it begins. The body—a term that contains the awful ambiguity of being both an active agent and an inert object, an emblem of life and evidence of death—requires reanimation if we are to engage with it. Its surface must be reinscribed with meaning, its form attached to history.

In *Roses* this reinscription attaches primarily to the *person*, Jean Donovan, who lost her life in a country whose government feels little compunction about taking it, rather than to the *persona*, "Jean Donovan," which represents the conversion of the body of the person into a transcendent, mythic image. This mythic image is apotheosized in narrative cinema as the star,

that secular deity who represents an idealization of appearance—physical looks, manners, movements, ways of inhabiting space and traversing time—with which we may identify.⁵ But most significantly, and paradoxically, *Roses* reincarnates Jean Donovan's body as a precarious balance of person, persona and narrative agent that cannot be any one of these possibilities entirely. The visual substance of the historical person provides the semiotic substance for a narrative character and mythic persona.⁶

Roses in December mobilizes all three axes along which the human body can be conceptualized. These axes—the term "axis" represents a geometric metaphor for what is more likely a poetic or ideological act of semiotic conceptualization—can be thought of as the substructural armature of any type of film. I envision them as extending at right angles to one another: (1) the narrative domain of motivated time and the body as causal agent, (2) the indexical domain of historical time and the body as social actor, and (3) the mythical domain of timelessness and the body as identificatory icon (along with a subordinate "primary identification" with projected images as such).⁷ A fourth domain, operative in reflexive and experimental documentaries more than in *Roses*, could be called the domain of the ironic or poetic; it could be represented as another set of the same three axes displaced from their original point of origin by the text's own distancing devices or formal strategies.⁸ These axes form a conceptual ground for the structural and stylistic features that engender form, the concrete materialization of content. They constitute a pre-figuration of the physical topography of the body rather than a repertoire of styles (those follow from this initial act of conceptualization). Just as classic tropes like metaphor and irony provide a pre-figurative ground for the representation of history, so these axes offer a pre-figurative framework for the representation of the body.⁹

Consider narrative as the "x" axis, the axis of emplotment. Narrative trajectory, in its classic form, suppresses difference and effects closure. It gives resolution. Contradictions appear and ramify only to be vanquished. Identifications and references get tilted onto the moving chain of events, of actions and enigmas, that sweep (or drift) toward a conclusion.

Complex strategies of “narrative work,” of rhetorical suasion and enchantment, operate to propel the story forward to its rendezvous with the end-point whose dim prospect the beginning foretold.

The “y” axis, then, is the referential axis which returns us to the historical. The historical, open-ended and contingent, lies at right angles to the closure of narrative. Narrative, as a closed system, gives the appearance of resolution to conflicts that remain unresolved in the historical domain. Indexical referentiality disrupts the hermetic seal of narrative and turns us toward the highly localized situation and practices from which a given story unfolds.

The “z” axis runs at right angles to the other two, establishing a third dimension of myth, spectacle, and identification with the “to-be-looked-atness” of the image. The “z” axis supports that form of stasis that myth and scopophilia have in common: identification eludes temporal flux, history or narrative. It tries to seize a moment and make it perpetual. When of sufficient magnitude the process becomes arresting, placing a blockage in the way of narrative or historical referentiality. It is also, of course and paradoxically, an integral part of how we experience both narrative and history. The Hollywood cinema of spectacle, the representation of women as the fetishized object of desire, and the transcendent image of the star are all important moments along this axis. This axis of identification may, as Laura Mulvey argues, threaten to arrest narrative (or expository) flow, requiring the mythic or iconic object to be motivated narratively (as show girl, for example).

These fixations of identification also run counter to the vicissitudes of history. As André Bazin notes, a living person relinquishes his/her provisional position within the historical field when made over as mythically complete, as an eternal symbol.¹⁰ The historic congeals into the mythic and, similarly, the social actor solidifies into a specifiable type; he or she becomes a character in the sense of displaying a set of behaviors that exemplify a particular, conventionalized conception of the human.

And, to stretch the geometric metaphor a little further, texts may adopt negative as well as positive values along each axis. A given text may challenge the apparent fullness and total presence associated with positive values. The “classic” narrative; the body as icon, myth or

deity; referentiality as direct, complete, one-to-one correspondence: each of these conceptions wavers as a text moves toward the other end of each axis: (1) the anti-narrative of modernism, (2) the self-referentiality of a *discours* that fabricates from language a prison-house, a signifying practice whose logic and meaning is in the play of differences it alone produces, and (3) the “figure” of dispersal that prevents a perfect overlay of person (social actor), narrative agent, and character, persona, or star. This “negative space,” in fact, has become a focus of increasing interest for many film-makers with quite varied effect.¹¹ Negative values along each axis do not abolish patterns of interference in favor of a deconstructive monotone; these texts, too, embody palpable contradictions that engage us diversely. They also crack open the geometric metaphor by dislodging the notion of an origin or center, a zero-degree point that less experimental works posit through their reliance on the codes of realism.

Every documentary will have its own set of coordinates on these axes. In general, documentaries will give greater stress to the “y” axis of historical reference than fictive films and fictive films greater to the “x” axis of narrative emplotment. Two other films that also offer meditations on the human body help clarify the balance of emphases in *Roses*. Stan Brakhage’s *The Act of Seeing with one’s own eyes* (1971), a prolonged, poetic scrutiny of cadavers in a Pittsburgh morgue, and Robert Gardner’s *Forest of Bliss* (1985), a formalist rendering of funeral rituals in the Indian city of Benares, both dwell primarily on a poetic reworking of the indexical link between image and referent and give virtually no sense of narrative agency. (Traces remain in *Forest of Bliss* but Gardner refuses to structure scenes in close accord with actual events and withholds subtitles to explain the conversations he carefully recorded in sync.) Brakhage succeeds in achieving a powerful meditation on the sight of the human body largely by so resolutely refusing any mythic or narrative dimension whereas Gardner, by offering traces of identificatory and narrative engagement that he refuses to sustain, conveys an exploitative or subversive attitude. (His film can be read as an exploitative use of social actors as “material” for his own poeticism¹² or as a resolute, subversive refusal to justify the ethnographic aspect of this effort by not assigning

cultural significance to events.) Brakhage withholds narrative and mythical engagement whereas Gardner only offers traces of narrative and hints of an anti-mythic de-materialization of the body. *Salvador*, discussed below, subsumes the historical person entirely within a narrative frame. *Roses* blends all three domains so that identification with a character and a sense of narrative agency impinge on the sense of poetic structure made from historical material.

Although *Roses in December* engages the domains of narrative agency and exemplary characterization, it avoids stereotypes and the problematics of male scopophilia, of either voyeurism or fetishism. Laura Mulvey and Gaylyn Studlar have argued that sadism and masochism each demand a story. But so does history.¹³ Explanations always take the form of stories (as a chain of cause and effect events arranged in time), and some take on the psychic overtones that Mulvey and Studlar note. But it is more the demand for an explanation of the wanton termination of a life than the demand for a sadistic or masochistic story that governs *Roses*.

In the film, Jean Donovan's life receives a narrative coherence from acts which are described rather than enacted since this portrait of her emerges after the fact of her murder. We learn that she grows up happily, she makes friends, she enjoys herself then she changes her priorities, devotes herself to others, establishes an important love relationship, serves the poor in El Salvador and is, because of this, violated and killed by government soldiers. Home movies, snapshots, archival footage and the testimony of others must provide the narrative trajectory Donovan herself retrospectively

Jean Donovan as a baby, with her brother



appears to have enacted. And they do so primarily for the reason suggested by White rather than any more psychopathic one: "If every fully realized story, however we define that familiar but conceptually elusive entity, is a kind of allegory, points to a moral, or endows events, whether real or imaginary, with a significance that they do not possess as a mere sequence, then it seems possible to conclude that every historical narrative has as its latent or manifest purpose the desire to *moralize* the events of which it treats."¹⁴

Roses in December most forcefully announces its intent to speak about the historical world in its opening scene of news footage recording the discovery of the gravesite and the disinterment of the four bodies. Its voice-over commentator (John Houseman) informs us that the film will speak about Jean Donovan, the person, who died in El Salvador for reasons that reside partially in her own past and partially in the history of that nation—in the collision between individual altruism and state authoritarianism.

Historical realism—an effect of the indexical quality of the photographic image and conventions of documentary form—finds its most forceful expression in the opening newsreel footage that begins the film. The clinical nature of the camera's gaze, or stare, is profoundly disconcerting. The sight of bodies pulled out of their grave by ropes only to flop inertly on the dusty ground, the physical residue of what had been a human life, approaches the unwatchable. Such images testify to the problematics of the "professional gaze."¹⁵ What ethical (or political) perspective authorizes such a gaze? As Vivian Sobchack notes, "The professional gaze is marked by ethical ambiguity, by technical and machine-like competence in the face of an event which seems to call for further and human response. . . . The concern for getting a clear and unobstructed image, and the belief that it is possible to strip that image, that representation, of human bias and perspective and ethicality so that it is 'objective,' indelibly marks the inscriptions of the professional gaze with their own problematic ethical perspective in the face of both human mortality and visual taboo."¹⁶

Roses in December refuses to endorse the professional gaze, however, even though it repeats this newsreel footage several times.

Instead, it offers a supplemental, moral response that fuses fact and value, body and meaning, that heals the breach between self and other opened by clinical professionalism or voyeurism. The elegiac structure of *Roses* restores dignity to the life so profoundly negated in the newsreel footage; it situates the person as an historical agent without transposing her into a function of imaginary identifications alone. Historical placement and contingency remain as active forces.

Roses also approaches without fully adopting the strategy of a controlling voice that can bring order to the conflicting voices held within the text. This strategy of containment is what gives a film like *Citizen Kane* only the appearance of disorder since the disparate testimonies and evidence are finally held in place by the narrating agency of the film itself, by "Orson Welles," the *auteur*. *Roses in December* incorporates a number of voices without fully assimilating them to a meaning or theme. Even John Houseman's voice-over commentary is held to a minimum and does not provide an ironic, riddle-solving equivalent to Welles's final tracking shot into the emblem of "Rosebud" as it goes up in flames.

A heterogeneous mix of authorized voices inform the film and destabilize the impression of a unified fictive space. Donovan's letters, read by her brother, on camera, and diary passages, read by Susan Stevens in voice-over; home movies of Jean horseback riding, presented in slow-motion with voice-over commentary by her riding instructor; the testimony of her lover, her friends and parents about her personality and outlook; contextualizing passages that allude to the history of military repression and violence in El Salvador through the use of stock footage and material shot for the film, together with press interviews or public testimony by key U.S. officials like then Secretary of State Alexander Haig or Ambassador to the U.N. Jean Kirkpatrick—all these strands contribute to a plane of logical ordering without achieving a full sense of closure. Kirkpatrick's claim (that the four women were not "just nuns" but "political activists"—as though this, if true, would be reason enough for summary execution) exerts the kind of undertow that interviews in many of Emile de Antonio's film do. The remark's validity cannot be upheld within the framework that surrounds it; it both

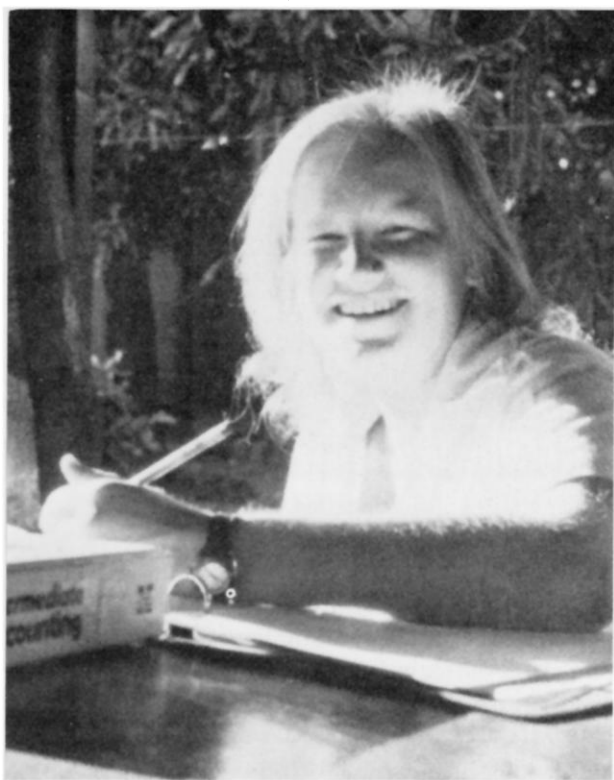


Jean Donovan horseback riding

introduces and nullifies a new conceptual frame by exposing its grotesque, underlying logic.

The radical force of Fredric Jameson's assertion about the nature of history is what this text *figures*, in an inescapably partial way, as a gap between the discourse of governmental figures and the events they try to rationalize away: "History is *not* a text, not a narrative, master or otherwise. . . . History is what hurts, it is what refuses desire and sets inexorable limits to individual as well as collective praxis."¹⁷ An excess remains.

Part of that excess is the question of interior subjectivity that *Roses in December* opens up only to leave incomplete. Narrative fiction can answer more fully to the question of what it feels like to occupy a given body, to present a certain persona, to walk the divide between that moment of myth or spectacle which depends on the physical presentation of an image of the self and those moments of narrative which rely on the actions of a character. The incarnation of characters by people (social actors) holds us to the surface of subjectivity in that interior states must be displayed on the skin of the actor. But, like the novel, the cinema also has means of engendering subjective states that are more interior. The full weight of the cinematic apparatus can be brought to bear in the constitution of an arresting subjectivity. (Flashbacks, memories, subjective points of view, music, sound effects—these devices and others can be made to serve the goal of subjectivity.) As Barry King notes, "The projection of interiority becomes less and less the provenance of the actor and more and more a property emerging from directorial or editorial decision. . . . While film increases the centrality of the actor in the process of signification, the formative capacity



Jean Donovan doing bookkeeping for the mission team. *ROSES IN DECEMBER* is available in film and videocassette form from First Run Features, 153 Waverly Place, New York, NY 10014.

of the medium can equally confine the actor more and more to being a bearer of effects that he or she does not or cannot originate.”¹⁸

One formidable aspect of the generation of an imaginary interiority by the cinematic apparatus occurs in the extrafilmic but cinematic discourse about stars. This discourse—in the form of fan magazines, gossip columns, press releases, “as told to” biographies and so on—lends an overarching unity to the disparate roles a star may play by stressing the characterological consistency of the star him/herself. Ironically, documentaries that stress the “z” domain of the mythic cannot rely on such a discourse for assistance (unless it is a documentary about a star or similar cultural hero). They may recruit the extrafilmic or noncinematic discourse that surrounds people whose historical role receives public attention, but, even more suggestively, such documentaries generate their own discourse about the person in order to lend greater coherence to the character they construct.

A film like *Roses*, then, incorporates two elements that are usually separated between the

classic Hollywood film and its supporting apparatus. On the one hand, it re-presents the codes of social *performance* whereby a person portrays him/herself to others, codes closely allied to realist acting codes. And on the other hand, the film generates *testimony* about the characterological dimensions of this social performance, or life. Testimony recruited to the film and designed to produce a sense of complex, individuated character as it emerges in relation to history contrasts with testimony external to fiction films but still generated within the cinematic apparatus. In the latter case such testimony produces the myth-like figures of identification (and of voyeuristic, fetishistic, or masochistic fascination) through the circulation of gossip or lore and through the encouragement of such practices as imitation and emulation, the mimicking of dress, gesture, and speech. (*Roses* also utilizes a lush, carefully lit and composed *mise-en-scène* for many of its interviews with witnesses, a strategy that underlines the narrative-like fabrication of a character without ever rupturing the linkage of this process to the historical figure of Jean Donovan.)

Roses in December restores a sense of complex character to the body of Jean Donovan without recourse to ahistorical modes of mythic formulation. Donovan’s life is neither reenacted (through the performance of another) nor apotheosized (through its removal from history). The interpretative field of testimony offered by other social actors in *Roses* fractures the imaginary unity of character. The subject’s eccentric identity outside itself, in the historical surround, remains evident throughout.

Documentary has traditionally taken an ambivalent position regarding interior states of mind—particularly in its *cinéma vérité* mode where the outer surface of the body, including utterances, takes on the charged importance of a naturalism—but one of the recurring themes in recent works like *Roses* is their effort to give structure to interiority. *Roses in December*, in sharp contrast to the feature-length compilation of four sets of interviews over 21 years in *28 Up* (Michael Apted, 1985), does not attempt to elaborate its characters by bullying them. Instead it moves toward a more thoroughly subjective invocation of interiority that engages us by means of processes of identification.

Specifically, *Roses* offers an imaginative reconstruction of Jean Donovan's last hours in El Salvador—from her drive to the airport to pick up the other nuns through their detention at a roadblock, their abduction, sexual violation, and cold-blooded execution. It is all shot in tinted black-and-white and uses dramatic camera angles to convey a foreboding tension. The sequence relies more heavily on the cinematic apparatus to achieve the markings of interiority than on the performance of actors to re-present the four murdered women. Indeed, no-body can replace the bodies that have been historically extinguished. We never see any individuated characters or the faces of any actors. The only sign of human agency that we see during this entire sequence, in fact, is a single hand on the steering wheel of a van. Narrative action takes place with only minimal attachment to acting or performance. The one glimpse of the hand is little more than a physical marker of the place of narrative agency. The killers are strongly de-individuated; they are given no close-ups, no dialogue, no physical movements that can be read as signs of expressivity. They are, indeed, not visible at all and their implied presence only serves to abolish the problematics of an event that would seem to propel itself.

A performance as such would be highly troubling, presenting the dilemma of four bodies too many. Fictive performance would depart from the indexical compact that grounds the reception of documentary. These almost entirely invisible actors are little more than what Heath has called “animated entities” in order to stress the lack of individuation that can be a legitimate feature of the narrative agent/actor as such. This sequence offers a subjective vision of how specific, historical individuals confronted the moment of their own death as it delivers the body of Jean Donovan to that site at which the film begins and to which meaning must be assigned.

This sequence contrasts instructively with a parallel one in *Salvador*, Oliver Stone's dramatic depiction of recent Salvadorean history as witnessed by an American journalist played by James Woods. Woods's character, like Thompson in *Citizen Kane*, allows for a *You Are There*-like recreation of historical events. Archbishop Romero's assassination, for example, occurs just after Woods and his Salvadorean



Jean Donovan at the wheel of the mission van

girlfriend take communion. He becomes an eyewitness to the mass mayhem that ensues when government troops attack the mourners at Romero's funeral service, and he introduces us to the liberal but weak-willed American ambassador who, at the decisive moment, capitulates to his advisors and gives the Salvadorean military access to the American matériel they need to defeat the revolutionaries' major initiative.

Among Woods's acquaintances is a plucky young woman who works with the poor and disabled. She remains rather peripheral to the film's development until, as with other characters we've met, the film shifts away from Woods to follow her momentarily. The moment chosen, of course, is a fateful one. It begins with her driving to the airport, continues as she and the three nuns leave and concludes with their brutal rape and murder by soldiers in civilian dress. In the next scene (but how much later we do not know), their grave site is discovered, the ambassador arrives, gives instructions and expresses outrage—suspending the aid he will later restore. The bodies are pulled from their common grave with ropes, and James Woods arrives to cradle the young woman's dead body and mourn her loss.

The sequence has an uncanny effect, partly because it is unanticipated (we have only minimal clues that this character represents Jean Donovan) and partly because the event, particularly the discovery and disinterment, is rendered with camera shots and dialogue strikingly similar to the archival news footage in *Roses*. Despite this similarity, though, the effect is markedly different.

In *Salvador*, the character's death works mainly to tell us something about the narrative, particularly about the character of the protagon-



SALVADOR: subordinating characters to narrative

onist—his compassion and decency despite appearances and the immoral nature of those around him. “Cathy,” the Jean Donovan character, functions as a donor, lending complexity to the hero’s character by sharpening the moral contrast between him and the Salvadorean government. Stone underscores this latter point by depicting the rape extensively. In *Roses* it is only mentioned verbally. Stone goes so far as to show the blouse being ripped from one of the women in a conveniently placed beam of light. The sight of her exposed breast shocks and distracts. It raises enormously disturbing issues about the film’s voyeurism and sensationalism. It displaces the shock in *Roses in December* when we see four dead bodies pulled from the ground to a voyeuristic and sadistic register prey to all those criticisms of the “to-be-looked-atness” of female characters so astutely avoided by *Roses*.

This sequence in *Salvador* also “authenticates” the narrative by attaching it to (a recreation of) an historical event. In *Roses*, Jean Donovan’s death serves mainly as the stimulus for the film to tell us something about this person, particularly about the quality of her life and the reasons for her murder. The emphasis becomes what the film can tell us about a life, rather than what a life can tell us about the film. In *Salvador*, the event becomes exemplary of the fictional universe and its characters; it remains contained within a diegetic frame it only exceeds metaphorically (being *like* real death, *like* the real death of Jean Donovan) rather than footage of an actual death. The film can move forward along its narrative axis without pause to contemplate the question to

which *Roses* devotes itself. It is just another fictional death—powerful in its effect, informative in its placement, disturbing in its representation, but fundamentally removed from the historical realm to which it metaphorically alludes.¹⁹

The representation of the human body in documentary requires placement in the relation to narrative character, mythic icon and *social* agent. The attempt to construct an interior meaning and subjective experience propels *Roses* toward the imaginary coherence of actual person and fictitious character in the image of the icon, and yet *Roses* also insists on the dispersal of that very coherence. For the documentary film, the person acts as an agent in history, not narrative, no matter how persistently we give meaning to the former by means of the latter. The figuration of this relationship represents a crisis moment in documentary. The full, ideological coherence of narrative may impose itself and cast the person into the imaginary mold of the narrative character; the cinematic apparatus for the engenderment of the actor-as-star may dissolve the linkage between the person and the plane of history, or the raw, inchoate flux of history may overwhelm the textual system and subsume the person into the senseless swirl of the anecdotal and episodic.

Roses in December maintains a precarious balance. Jean Donovan takes on the attributes of character (here clustered around the journey as spiritual odyssey, hazardous service to the poor as a potential pathway to martyrdom, and the attendant rituals of both witness and self-discovery) and of mythic icon (here associated with qualities of dedication, devotion, and grace), but she also remains situated as an agent within the historical arena to which the stickiness of the film’s indexical sounds and images constantly return us. The result undermines the imaginary solidity of the fictive and the mythic and confirms the necessary alliance between contradiction and closure in narrative, between fullness and the imaginary in myth. A resistance occurs. Tensions prevail that make the very alignment of person/character/icon seem a violation of the body of the social actor. Those transgressive moments of identification and those fetishistic or voyeuristic moments of scopophilic desire carry the potential for a disruption and stoppage of temporal flow. They

become all the more transgressive of an historical field that refuses all attempts to arrest it, however momentarily.

The recovery of the seven bodies from the space shuttle *Challenger* represented an acute embarrassment. The apparently total vaporization of their bodies called forth prodigious acts of commemoration and myth-making. Once enacted, such myths have no further need of physical bodies, flesh and blood limited by time and place, character and subjectivity, factual achievements and the witness of others.²⁰ Whereas it was the return of the historical body of Jesus that signalled his status as the Christ, son of God, the return of these seven bodies signalled their status as all-too-human flesh, constrained by the vicissitudes of time rather than transcendent to it. By contrast, the recovery of the body of Jean Donovan did not represent embarrassment, save for her murderers, but indictment. The recovery of all four bodies inaugurated a process of moral, legal, and political judgment which it is the function of this complex documentary amalgam of history, myth, and narrative to render. If a political unconscious flows through the text of *Roses in December* it is one that evokes, in the story of a single life, an affirmation of the utopian impulse that, neither imaginary nor mythical, locates itself in the realm of history itself.³²

NOTES

1. A number of other films have played an important part in formulating these questions. They include: *Hard Metals Disease*, a video documentary by Jon Alpert (1981?), *Salvador* (Oliver Stone, 1986), *Frank: A Vietnam Veteran* (Frank Simon and Vince Canzoneri, 1981), *Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo* (Susana Munoz, Lourdes Portillo, 1985), *Witness to War* (Deborah Schaeffer, 1985), *A Man Marked to Die: Twenty Years Later* (Eduardo Coutinho, 1984). Although a television movie has been produced that also deals with Jean Donovan's life and murder, and a book written about her as well, I have not had an opportunity to review these two texts and must defer remarks about them to another time.
2. I trace four major documentary structures in relation to the voice of the film-maker in my "The Voice of Documentary," *Film Quarterly*, vol. 36, no. 3 (Spring 1983), also in *Movies and Methods*, Vol. II. In many ways, the present article is a continuation of the previous one, taking up the question of the body. The emphasis here is not on the film-maker's body, however. Their focus would direct us toward the personal essay, diary, and a number of experimental forms. I hope to explore this area in a future essay.
3. Rubbo's films for the NFB, such as *Waiting for Fidel* and *Sad Song of Yellow Skin*, give prominence to his own role as a curious, slightly innocent investigator with whom the audience is invited to identify at the same time as it is apprised of the investigator's own

limitations, foibles or biases. Bonnie Klein adopts a fairly similar position in her NFB documentary on pornography, *Not a Love Story*.

4. Some possibilities of a first-person voice in documentary are explored by Julianne Burton in her "Democratizing Documentary: Modes of Address in the Latin American Cinema, 1958-1972," in Thomas Waugh, editor, *Show Us Life: Toward a History and Aesthetics of the Committed Documentary* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1984).
5. See Stephen Heath's essay, "Body, Voice," in *Questions of Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981) for a full discussion of the differences among person, actor, agent, character, star, and "figure," Heath's term for a way of representing the linkages among the axes of history, narrative, and myth such that an instability results. Another useful discussion of these terms occurs in Barry King, "Articulating Stardom," *Screen* vol. 26, no. 5 (September-October 1985).
6. The distinction between substance as the material facticity of something and sub-stance as the support for something derives from Kenneth Burke by way of Frank Lentricchia (in *Criticism and Social Change*, p. 74). Similar concepts of "the metaphor that's meant" from Gregory Bateson and of "second-order systems" in my *Ideology and the Image* also refer to this destabilization of self-evident presence into contextually dependent paradoxes that are resolvable only within a dialectical frame.
7. The indexical domain here subsumes what I have elsewhere, particularly in *Ideology and the Image*, referred to as exposition. Both the indexical image and expository discourse escape the illusionism of narrative that masks its production. They attest to their own status as discourse, but they also refer to a realm beyond their own frame. And whereas exposition can occur in fictive texts (a voice-over narration is a prime example), the indexical, wherever it occurs, directs our attention not only to itself as a representation but also, by dint of its resemblance, to that which it represents.
8. It is also possible to consider these four axes in relation to the four predominant tropes of rhetoric. In this case, the historical would correspond to metonymy, narrative to metaphor, the mythic to synecdoche, and the ironic to irony. See Hayden White's *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1973), especially pp. xi-x and pp. 31-38.
9. After beginning to conceptualize these three axes, their parallelism with Hayden White's notion of pre-figuration in historical writing became more clear, less in terms of the specific categories, which differ in accordance with the difference between 19th-century historiography and documentary film-making today, but more in terms of the notion of the realm of pre-figuration as such. Matters of style and form remain to be decided after a text's placement in relation to the axes has been considered. No conscious act is implied on the part of the film-maker, but rather the same kind of "poetic act" that White attributes to historians when they position themselves, pre-figuratively, within the possibilities of a linguistic field. His definition of written history requires only slight modification to be brought to bear on documentary: "... a verbal structure in the form of narrative prose discourse that purports to be a model, or icon, of past structures and processes in the interest of explaining what they were by representing them [italics his]" (*Metahistory*, p. 2). This last phrase also leads White to add a footnote over a page long in which he takes up the vexing issue of realism. White's stress on the artistic elements of realist historiography also parallels my concern here with the narrative and mythic elements of documentary over the indexical or historical elements of fiction.
10. See André Bazin, "The Stalin Myth in Soviet Cinema," in Bill Nichols, ed., *Movies and Methods*, Vol. II, pp. 29-40.
11. Two excellent, feminist examples of such "negative explorations" are Kay Armatage's *Speak Body* (1979) and Brenda Longfellow's *The Two Marilyn's* (1987). Armatage presents women's voices off-screen while we see fragments of their bodies and hear about their personal experiences with abortion. Longfellow ponders the cultural, masculinist uses of the bodies of "our Marilyn," Mar-

ilyn Bell, a Canadian who was the first person to swim across Lake Ontario, and "their Marilyn," Marilyn Monroe, whose body represented an entirely different set of attitudes and assumptions. The film utilizes archival footage and reenactment to invert the normal dramatic curve—stressing the middle of Bell's swim over her setting out or arrival—and to fracture the mythic meanings that have settled around each of these two Marylins.

12. If read as exploitative, Gardner's *Forest of Bliss* contrasts fascinatingly with the highly moralistic *Not a Love Story*. If *Not a Love Story* is an ethnographic pornography, *Forest of Bliss* is a pornographic ethnography.

13. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," and Gaylyn Studlar, "Masochism and the Perverse Pleasures of the Cinema," both in *Movies and Methods*, vol. II (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), Hayden White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," in W. J. T. Mitchell, *On Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

14. Hayden White, "The Value of Narrativity," pp. 14–15.

15. Vivian Sobchack in "Inscribing Ethical Space: Ten Propositions on Death, Representation and Documentary," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* (Fall 1984), describes six different visual forms in which the encounter of film-maker and death or dying can be registered, each bearing a distinct set of ethical implications. The "professional gaze" is one of these.

16. Sobchack, "Inscribing Ethical Space," p. 298. See also Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (New York: Basic Books, 1978) which argues that the "professional" or "objective" code of reportage derives, ironically, from a loss of faith in the givenness of the world in the post-World War I environment. If the world is open to manipulation better to

remain apart from it and report "the facts" dissociated from values; objectivity provides an internal, evaluative code of professional conduct independent of the values that can be assigned to the facts presented.

17. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, pp. 35, 102.

18. Barry King, "Articulating Stardom," p. 45.

19. Vivian Sobchack makes a similar distinction in her own description of the representation of death in cinema: "Thus, when death is represented as fictive rather than real, when its signs are structured and stressed so as to function iconically and symbolically, it is understood that only the *simulacrum* of a visual taboo is being violated. However, when death is represented as real, when its signs are structured and inflected so as to function indexically, a visual taboo is violated and the representation must find ways to justify the violation." "Inscribing Ethical Space," p. 291. This is precisely the strategy of *Roses*: to offer complex justification for the sight with which it begins, the disinterment of the four bodies.

20. In contrast to the front-page news of the disaster itself, for example, the shipment of the recovered remains to Dover Air Force Base in Delaware for "final treatment in accordance with the families' wishes" became a small, two-paragraph item buried on a back page of the April 25, 1986, *New York Times*.

I wish to thank Julianne Burton, Vivian Sobchack and Michael Renov for numerous, extremely valuable comments and suggestions. An earlier reflection on some of the issues presented in this essay appears in another essay, "Questions of Magnitude," in John Corner, ed., *Documentary and Mass Media* (London: Edward Arnold, 1986).

MICHAEL RENOV

Newsreel: Old and New— Towards An Historical Profile

Our films remind some people of battle footage: grainy, camera weaving around trying to get the material and still not get beaten/trapped. Well, we and many others, are at war. We not only document that war, but try to find ways to bring that war to places which have managed so far to buy themselves isolation from it. . . . Our propaganda is one of confrontation. Using film—using our voices with and after films—using our bodies with and without camera—to provoke confrontation. . . . Therefore we keep moving. We keep hacking out films, as quickly as we can, in whatever way we can.

—Robert Kramer, *New York Newsreel*, 1968¹

Documentary remains the major form of political filmmaking in this country. It has always been and probably will be in the foreseeable future. And yet, there has been very, very little discussion of how documentary films actually function. The political efficacy of documentary is derived from the relationship of the audience to the film—not the relationship of the filmmaker to the subject.

—Larry Daressa, *California Newsreel*, 1983²

December 1987 will mark the twenty-year anniversary of the formation of Newsreel, a radical film-making collective conceived during the last flush of New Left activism. Once boasting offices in New York, San Francisco, Boston, Los Angeles, Detroit, Chicago, and Atlanta, Newsreel now survives in two versions: California Newsreel, San Francisco, producers and distributors of films about the workplace as well as South Africa and apartheid, with a new focus on media education (educating Americans *about* rather than *through* media); and Third World Newsreel, New York, vortex of film and video activities intended as the cultural interventions of the disenfranchised. In the following pages, I hope to suggest areas of conceptual as well as functional continuity and discontinuity between the two extant Newsreel organizations, as well as between the present enterprises and